



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Numéro Deux

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instrument for her orgasms (though early in the film we see semen dripping from her body, we have little evidence as things go on whether he is coming or not); as she becomes interested in less and less, he suggests more and more that some part of himself is in reserve—this, too, is insured precisely by her desire; and his erection is made to signify this mystery, is seen as the readily possessible sign of a shielded interiority. This particular mystification of the male would seem to be one of Oshima's most dazzling reversals.

The severing of the penis and testicles after death, then, is an admission of desire's end, as well as a fetishizing of that desire's sign. Since the act is seen as pathetically insufficient, the mystery of desire has been preserved through death. We may suspect that the literal nature of possession in this instance permits the re-integration of the symbolic. As the text increasingly suggests itself as a portrayal of isolated and bizarre activity, we as audience are permitted a return to the world of the legally constituted, with its sanctions and proscriptions. In the realm of the symbolic the murderous intent of the gaze becomes sublimated, through a system of cultural supports, until its potency is that of a mere metaphor. Sada's behavior may now be seen as fully suspect (the gruesome close-ups and the distancing overhead shots enforce this) and dangerous, antisocial. The severing, the cut, ironically insures its alien character and permits the drawing of distinctions, returns us harmoniously to the relational world. We may wish to say that desire for the possession of images cannot surely involve such extremity. . . . Still, we may be drawn by this film to put into question such problems as the preservation in wish form of a sexual and scopophilic imaginary, the role played by death in the economy of desire and the residence of the code of possession within various mental and social activities, including watching and talking about this extremely desirable film.

—MICHAEL SILVERMAN

NUMÉRO DEUX

To follow the career of Jean-Luc Godard has been to watch the long, fascinating process of bourgeois cinema's annihilation and the formation of a new revolutionary cinema (to use the words of Godard

himself). The turning point was *Weekend* (chronologically in sync with the events of May '68) which seemed to be showing us the total social destruction of Western civilization as we knew it. Left with literally nothing, it was necessary to rebuild from scratch, to recreate (re-educate, Godard might say). Hence he made *Le Gai Savoir*, in which two young Maoist semioticians endeavored to create a new system of communication, both verbal and visual. Six years later, Godard has made *Numéro Deux*, and it might well have been the film these two young people were trying to make.

Numéro Deux focuses on a middle-class working family, chronicling the interpersonal relationships of husband Pierre and wife Sandrine. The emphasis is on their sexual problems; much is made of Pierre's impotence and Sandrine's constipation. We also see the children and the grandparents. Godard imposes a political superstructure over the entire cluster of relationships, but it is not as blatant as in, say, *Tout Va Bien*. And of course, there is also a cinematic superstructure of visual technique: Godard as usual is preoccupied with the nature of the image. Put simply, it is the old story of form versus content, but never before have they been so well integrated.

Godard has said that the conflict between sound and image (form) is the cinematic metaphor of the sociopolitical conflict between what one sees and what one actually experiences (content). In such films as *Pravda* and *See You at Mao*, this theme of discontinuity has resulted in sometimes politically questionable but always aesthetically eloquent cinematic essays. Sound and image are at it again in *Numéro Deux*, and the battle, though sometimes obscure, is always fascinating, even poetic in a strange sort of way. For *Numéro Deux* is also an experiment in video, and video is the perfect vehicle for Godard's latest semiological meditation. Superimposition and other effects possible with video are employed, and not only are they fully integrated with the subject matter, but they occasionally erupt into sudden moments of pure beauty for beauty's sake; beauty, that is, in that special Godardian sense.

Take the opening "shot" for example. On the left there is a TV screen square flickering red light. On the right is another TV screen framing part of Pierre's face occasionally replaced by a comparable view of Sandrine's face. The rest of



Godard's video + film combination in
NUMÉRO DEUX

the screen is black. Between the TV squares is a vertical column of words: "mon," "ton," "son." Next to "son" is the word "image" which flashes on and off. To the right of "image" is another "son" which is periodically covered up by the widening of the right TV square which expands to show all of Pierre's (or Sandrine's) face before receding again.

In this one "beautiful" composition, Godard has presented all of his concerns. Form: there is grammar (mon, ton, son), the necessary foundation for linguistic communication between people; there is the danger of language inherent in its double meanings (son/son); and there is the connection between linguistic and visual communication (son/image). Content: the partial face of Pierre/Sandrine expanding to show the entire face while covering up the "son" which means in French both "his" and "hers." These visual elements on screen in constant motion somehow unite both form and content. We know there is a connection between Pierre's and Sandrine's problems and basic problems in communications theory. And this fusion is accomplished in visual terms by this one composition. How, is difficult to express in words. And that in itself is another of Godard's concerns. One can extrapolate from this shot the numerous and complex layers of meaning in *Numéro Deux*. It is a massive collage of visual and verbal statements that is quite often difficult to sort out.

The shifting images of Pierre and Sandrine in the right-hand TV screen are reminiscent of the opening of *Persona* where the small boy reaches

out to touch the giant shifting images of Liv Ullman and Bibi Andersson. It seems Godard's and Bergman's concerns in this case are quite similar (though Bergman lacks Godard's penchant for *written* language). I bring up Bergman only because Godard himself does early on in *Numéro Deux*. At this point, we see several TV screens showing quite different images with correspondingly quite different sound tracks: there is a political demonstration of sorts in a Third World nation; simultaneously there is footage from *Scenes from a Marriage*. One recalls Godard's distinction between bourgeois and revolutionary cinema: bourgeois cinema is a reflection of reality. Surely *Scenes from a Marriage* is a reflection of reality. Conversely, revolutionary cinema is concerned with the reality of reflection, *i.e.*, the political demonstration on the other TV screen or, for that matter, any of Godard's post-*Weekend* films. It appears that Godard is making a rather strong statement about the "truth" in his new film as opposed to the "truth" in a film like Bergman's. (*Persona* is an exception. According to Godard's definition, it is a revolutionary film, probably Bergman's only one.)

Godard, the elitist, no doubt believes that he can capture "truth" more precisely with his usual Brechtian techniques of distancing than with the more traditional techniques of bourgeois filmmakers. And the Brechtian techniques do have a field day in *Numéro Deux*. Most striking is the fact that, except for two sequences at the film's start and finish, the entire action is seen through relatively small TV screens within the frame; the surrounding area is completely black. *Numéro Deux* offers neither plot nor character development but rather chunks of action and talking periodically interrupted by titles which slowly spell themselves out letter by letter. It is a curious effect that warrants closer attention.

We find ourselves sounding out the word step by step as it comes on the screen. We hear the progressive changes in sound as we start with the entire first word, then the first part of the second word while the remaining part of the first word is still seen on screen, then half and half, then three quarters of the new word (we can guess the word by now, but we still have to add on the last sounds of the first word simply because we see it on screen), and finally, the entire new word. These inter-

mediate steps where we are sounding out nonsense syllables force us to see how we take intelligible language for granted, oblige us to stop and consider the thought processes involved in reading and comprehending the written word. (The additional "layer" of reading English subtitles may prove to be an overload for the non-French-speaking viewer!)

Interwoven in *Numéro Deux* is a complex web of Godardian dualisms. The most prominent, image/sound, has already been mentioned. There is also fiction/documentary, male/female, before/behind, factory/garden, and finally, as the basis for the entire film, there is *numéro un/numéro deux*. What does *numéro deux* signify? Sandrine says, "On dit, 'il y avait une fois,' mais pourquoi pas 'il y avait deux fois?'" It is this second time which interests Godard, and again, it relates back to techniques of visual communication. This second time is literally a second point of view, for using video, Godard can superimpose a second shot in negative on a given shot. He does it often, and invariably, the two shots are of opposite focal lengths and angle. With two contradictory points of view *at once*, the validity that each would carry separately is completely negated. All reference points are gone, *everything* is open to question. Just as we questioned the stability (validity) of language when the letters of the titles started shifting to form different words, we now question the validity of the image when we suddenly see a reverse-angle shot superimposed on a given shot. One is forced to conclude that nothing is given. The borderline between subject and object has been erased.

Again, this is all form. How does this relate to content? Sandrine and Pierre's main problem is one of subject versus object, sexually speaking. Sandrine wonders if she is a factory or a landscape, "an electric factory with charges and discharges, producing babies and meals; or a spectacle to look at, a part of society." Pierre takes the latter stance (she is an object). In a rather poetic monologue (unusual for Godard), he says his wife's body is like a river. Sandrine takes the former point of view (she is a subject) and she is not happy about how she is being ruled. In a long shot, we see the two of them having sex; Pierre enters Sandrine from behind. Says Sandrine off-screen, "Not a

film of the left or right, but a film before and behind." Then there is a superimposition of Vanessa the young daughter, in close-up, watching the act. Sandrine continues off-screen, "... before is children, behind is government." Thus the before/behind dualism takes on several meanings: (1) the wife is under the rule of the husband, (2) this is a social microcosm for the entire political system, (3) the result of this union/political system is a child (with all accompanying symbolism intended: again one thinks of the boy in *Persona*), and (4) the entire network is self-reflexive; all contradictory view points have their visual equivalents in the reverse-angle superimpositions. Elsewhere, Godard links Sandrine's dissatisfaction with visual communication. She says, "Turn on the television and you become an accomplice . . . you're looking for news about yourself when what you see is news about others." And this is the essential core of *Numéro Deux*. Godard presents numerous episodes constantly shifting in meaning, but they always relate back to the matters discussed here.

In closing, it is interesting to note the two sequences which frame the film. They are the only images in a full 35mm format and, significantly, Godard appears in both. In the opening sequence we see him in his workshop, surrounded by an array of equipment. He talks about technology and the making of *Numéro Deux*. The composition is curious: Godard's "real" head is cut off by the top of the frame, but we see it lower down on a TV screen, for he is actually talking into a camera. Surely this is deliberate on his part. The head, the center for human thought and communication, is separate from the body and is seen as a video image.

At the film's end, we again see Godard, now lying exhausted over the control panel. Above left is a TV screen showing Sandrine talking; her image and voice are not in sync. Above right is another TV screen showing Vanessa, silent. Godard turns toward her.

What is the movement between these two sequences? Godard's distraught state must be significant. Is he tired of all this "communication"? He knows he can control the sounds and images of these characters simply by pulling levers. Loud/soft, dark/light, it is all at his fingertips. Yet it all remains a stalemate.

—STAN SCHWARTZ